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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the pressure on social studies teachers to teach about the United States Constitution during its bicentennial period and offers ideas to improve instruction about the document. After reviewing the inappropriateness of memorization of the document and suggesting that its content be organized to focus on its major concepts and principles, the paper places primary emphasis on concept mapping as an effective strategy for teaching about the Constitution. Both the technique and the topic require a perceptual grappling with the subject matter. In mapping the document, constitutional ideas are arranged and rearranged to show new patterns of meaning, images are linked and cross-linked to show visual relationships, and concepts are ordered and reordered to show different hierarchical structures. A table illustrating a concept map of the Constitution is included. (TRS)

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Teaching About The United States Constitution in The Bicentennial Period

by

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TEACHING ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION IN THE BICENTENNIAL PERIOD

During the bicentennial of the United States Constitution, social studies teachers will, no doubt, be asked to place heavy emphasis on the United States Constitution in their classes. Many will be excited and challenged by the renewed interest in the historical, political, and philosophical origins of the Constitution, its enduring principles and values, and contemporary constitutional issues. Through the efforts of the national and state bicentennial commissions, commemorative activities played out against the historical perspective of two hundred years will provide students and adults alike with inspiring lessons in history and civics. Certainly, this "teachable moment" of an important and constant content area in the social studies curriculum offers great promise for improving teaching about the Constitution in schools. It is to this end of improving instruction about the Constitution that the ensuing ideas are offered for teachers.

Teaching about the United States Constitution, like teaching about any other topic, requires an inquiry into such curricular commonplaces as what content to select, how to organize the content for instructional purposes, and how to present the subject matter. Teachers might get some instructive ideas on what to do as well as what not to do by studying the history of Constitution-teaching. In a short historical review of society's expectations of instruction on the Constitution, R. Freeman Butts found that during the early decades of the Constitution's existence students were expected to memorize the text of the document. Later, a clause-by-clause description was used

to teach constitutional and governmental structures and functions, with little or no attention focused on interpretation or constitutional conflict. Still later, in the 1920s, Constitution-teaching received a strong but perhaps spurious boost when many states enacted Americanism laws that required special study of the Constitution. Schools were expected to inculcate such values as Americanism, patriotism, and loyalty. Viewed as a reactionary impulse, this mode of imposition gave way during the 1930s to a so-called liberal impulse that impelled civic educators to use the Bill of Rights as core content in teaching about the Constitution. Although neither emphasis has remained dominant over the past fifty years, each impulse has maintained its own approach to the Constitution. At the risk of over-generalizing, we might say that the liberal impulse has tended to focus on civil liberties of the Bill of Rights, while its conservative counterpart has tended to emphasize the protection of property rights.

Obviously, rote memorization of the entire document is an inappropriate approach to teaching about the Constitution in the bicentennial period, and happily, there is a variety of instructional materials available for teachers to use in their classes. These materials include commentary, analysis, and interpretation of the Constitution from the Preamble through the amendments.

Another way to organize the content of the Constitution is to focus on its major concepts and principles. Enduring valuative ideas, such as liberty, equality, security, justice, and the general welfare, and such principles as separation of powers, checks-and-balances, judi-

cial review, and federalism are essential content when the Constitution is being taught. In still another approach, Constitutional ideas, issues, and cases might be selected as they appear in a chronological study of United States history. The big question over the nature of the union implicit in the enduring idea of, "We the people of the United States in order to form a more perfect union," might, for example, be considered in discussions of the Kentucky and Virginia Resolves, the nullification controversy, and the secessionist movements before the Civil War.

Variation in instructional modes, like differences in the organization of subject matter, is a crucial concern in teaching about the Constitution. Typical techniques run the gamut from drill-type recitations to computer simulations. A novel instructional tool with potential for bringing about meaningful learning of the Constitution is a powerful strategy called concept mapping.

But what is concept mapping? According to Novak and Gowin, a concept map is "a schematic device for representing a set of concept meanings embedded in a framework of propositions." The range of relationships among the concepts is mapped out by a system of linking lines and words. Linking lines chart the direction of relationships, while linking words label the lines and connect the concepts to form propositions. The map is actually a verbal picture of a cluster of concepts.

Before defining and applying concept mapping to the United States Constitution, it is necessary to define what a concept is. A concept

refers to a group of recurrent events or objects that possess certain common features. These objects or events are combined into one category because they share certain characteristics. The concept is assigned a name so that it can be acquired and communicated. For example, "constitution" is the label used to refer to a body of law that is fundamental and basic to the organization of a group or state. More specifically, the United States Constitution is an example of the concept "constitution."

In addition to the possesssion of common features, concepts have hierarchical relationships. Larger, superordinate concepts include smaller, subordinate concepts. The structure of government, for example, represents a category of which the legislative, executive, and judicial branches are constituent parts. Moreover, other concepts can be subsumed under each of the branches of government. An awareness of this hierarchical network of relationships among concepts is essential to the construction of a concept map.

There is no one best approach for constructing a concept map, but some suggestions are offered, and a concept map of the United States Constitution is presented as an example. At the outset, the class needs to have an idea of what a concept is. If help is needed on this problem, any standard textbook on social studies methods will have at least one chapter on the definitional and pedagogical nature of concepts. After the meaning of a concept is explained, students need to see how concept words are connected in sentences by linking words such as "are, " "is," "with," and "for example." Most paragraphs in social

studies textbooks are fraught with concepts that are tied together with linking words. At this point, students should be ready to recognize that "constitution" functions as a concept and that the United States Constitution is an example of the concept "constitution." To actually map the United States Constitution, students should be asked to read the textbook chapter on the Constitution, make a list of the central concepts in one column, and in a separate column, develop a list of linking words. About seven of the most essential concepts should then be rank-ordered from more inclusive to less inclusive. For example, from more than sixty concepts identified in Todd and Curti's treatment of the Constitution in The Rise of the American Nation, eight key concepts listed below were arranged in loose hierarchical order:

Constitution

Fundamental law

Written document

Basic principles

Divided power

Government

Structure of government

Functions of government

Each concept word was written in an oval-shaped diagram. The concept, "constitution," was placed in the superordinate position with the other seven key concepts arranged in a subordinate relationship. Other related concepts were subsumed under these key concepts. To form the concept map, a network of relationships between the hierarchical concepts

was mapped by connecting the concepts with linking lines and by labeling these lines with linking words that formed valid propositions. For example, the concept map in Figure 1 shows that fundamental law is tied to the Constitution because the document itself defines Constitution as the "supreme law of the land." The document is, of course, linked to the fundamental law because the nation has a written constitution. Included in the text are the basic principles of the Constitution and the institution of government. Ideas of divided power, civil liberties, and constitutional change are a few examples of these fundamental principles, while governmental type, structure, and function are constituent elements of government. Also, the concepts of conventions as mechanisms for writing and approving the Constitution are subsumed under a written document.

Concept maps will, of course, vary considerably in appearance, structure, and in the representation of conceptual meaning and hierarchical relationships. Nevertheless, when evaluating a concept map, one should check closely to see that linking lines and linking words are used to show relationships; that the relationships are valid; and that the concepts are hierarchically ordered with clear superordinate to subordinate relationships.

This paper has placed primary emphasis on concept mapping as an effective strategy for teaching about the United States Constitution because both the technique and the topic require a "perpetual grappling" with subject matter. In mapping the document, Constitutional ideas are arranged and rearranged to show new patterns of meaning;

images of the Constitution are linked and cross-linked to show visual relationships; and concepts are ordered and reordered to show different hierarchical structures. These conceptual actions cannot be carried out just inside the head, but are best mapped out on paper. The concept map is one way "for externalizing concepts and propositions." More importantly, it involves the kind of learning that, according to Dewey, is the "offspring of doing," which results in "genuine knowledge and fruitful understanding." Therefore, rather than having students memorize passages in the Constitution, teachers should ask them to grapple with Constitutional concepts through map making.

CONCEPT MAP OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

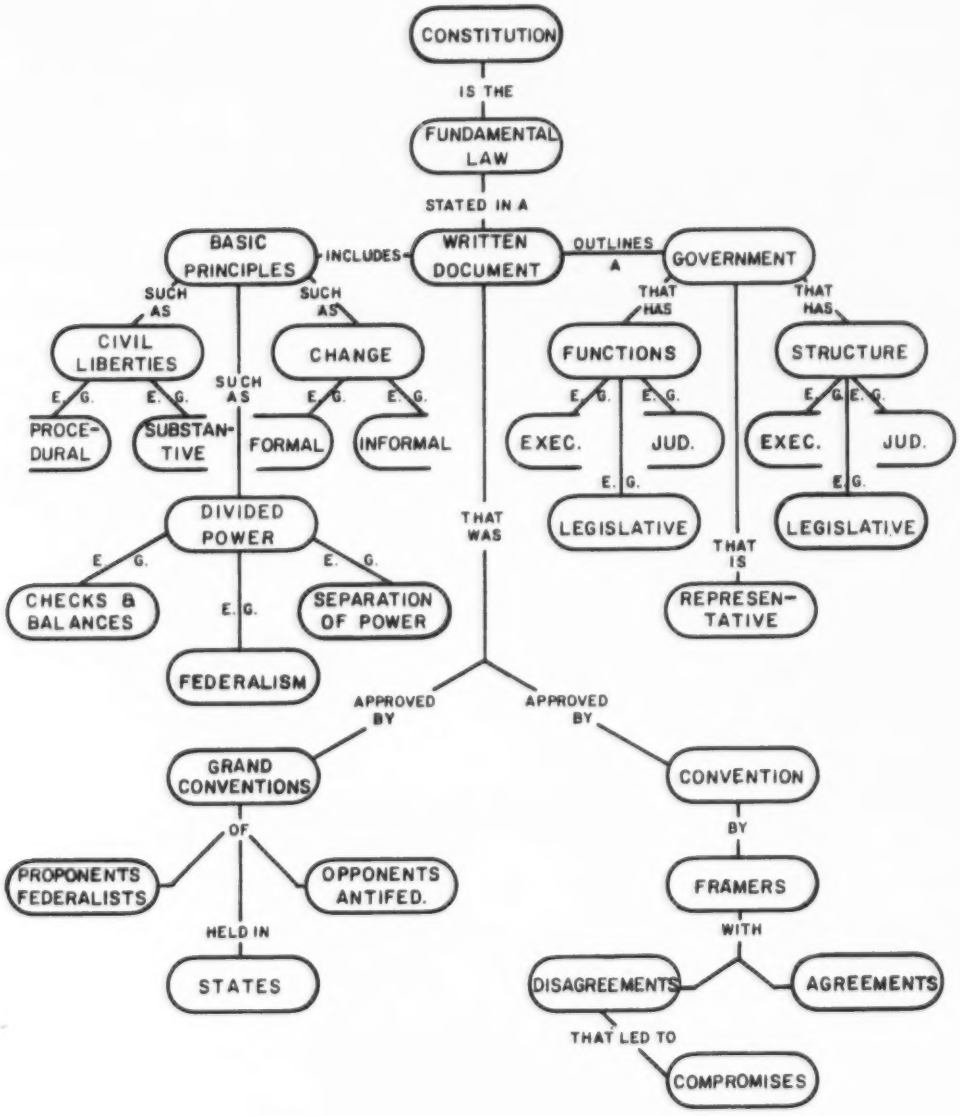

Table 1. Concept map of the United States Constitution

Notes

[1] R. Freeman Butts, "Society's Expectations for School Instruction," Teaching about the Constitution in American Secondary Schools, ed. Howard D. Mehlinger (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, 1981), pp. 1 - 23.

[2] For example, see Edward S. Corwin, The Constitution and What It Means Today, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958); Edward S. Corwin, ed. The Constitution of the United States of America: Analysis and Interpretation, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953); John A. Garraty, ed. Quarrels That Have Shaped the Constitution, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964); Broadus Mitchell and Louise Pearson Mitchell, A Biography of the Constitution of the United States, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); John J. Patrick and Richard C. Remy, Lessons on the Constitution, ((Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, 1982).

[3] Ronald A. Girlach, "Instructional Techniques for Teaching about the Constitution," Social Education 37 (May, 1973), 411.

[4] Ibid., 400 - 411.

[5] John D. Novak and D. Bob Gowin, Learning How to Learn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 15.

[6] Ibid., 15 - 54.

[7] Richard C. Phillips, Teaching for Thinking in High School Social Studies, (Reading, Mass.: Addison, Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1974), p. 92.

[8] For example, see Phillips, Teaching for Thinking in High School Social Studies, pp. 72-94; Jack L. Nelson and John U. Michaelis, Secondary Social Studies (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), pp. 67-81.

[9] Novak and Gowin, Learning How to Learn, pp. 32 - 34.

[10] Ibid., 93 - 108.

[11] Ibid., 17.

[12] John Dewey, Democracy and Education, (1916; reprint, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 275.